

Oliver by Birgitta Sif

Margaret Branscombe

KS2

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Introduction

Oliver is a book beautifully illustrated and written by Birgitta Sif. It has a simple, understated narrative that provides a rich backdrop for exploring themes common to childhood such as feeling different, loneliness, imagination and friendship. In this scheme of work, the overall aim is to explore the theme of 'feeling different' as, ironically, a common experience. It encourages students to have an inclusive, rather than alienating, attitude to those who act or feel 'different'.

The book was shortlisted for a Kate Greenaway medal in 2014 and has been endorsed by Amnesty International UK 'because it reminds us that we are all born free and equal and we all have our own thoughts and opinions' (<http://www.birgittasif.com/>).

The following scheme of work includes four one-hour lessons that use drama to examine events in the book more closely and then make connections with the students' own experiences. The drama work shifts between recreating the experiences of those who behave 'differently' and examining the attitudes of those who encounter differences in others.

Learning objectives

By the end of this scheme, students will have explored the following ideas:

- ▶ Feeling different is a common experience
- ▶ What makes us feel different varies from person to person
- ▶ Feeling different does not need to prevent us from having friends
- ▶ We can find ways to include people who seem 'different' from ourselves.

And students will:

- ▶ Become familiar with the story and themes of *Oliver*
- ▶ Narrate the story using the pictures as 'clues'
- ▶ Have experience working together to create scenes and tableaux based on the book
- ▶ Have experience working together to create imagined scenes based on the themes of the book
- ▶ Have experience performing created work
- ▶ Have experience commenting on the work of others
- ▶ Have experience commenting on their own creative process
- ▶ Select and prepare a creative response to the book – this can be done as an individual or group project.

Lesson 1: Introduction to the book

Learning objectives

By the end of the lesson students will have learnt:

- ▶ To look closely at illustrations for clues to themes
- ▶ To discuss themes in books and relate them to their own experiences
- ▶ The purpose and basic form of forum theatre
- ▶ To apply forum theatre techniques to the theme of 'being different'
- ▶ To reflect on how the forum theatre scenes affected those regarded as 'different'.

Resources

Oliver by Birgitta Sif, published by Walker Books Ltd.

Introduction to the book *Oliver* (5 mins)

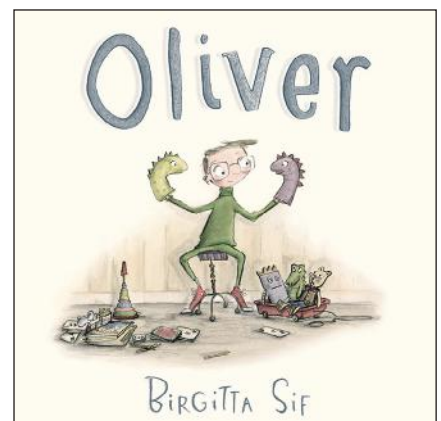
Gather the students around and show them the front cover of the book *Oliver*. Tell them that the boy in the picture is the main character, Oliver, and ask questions

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Amnesty International has produced a resource sheet for teaching about human rights using *Oliver* and this can be downloaded from https://www.amnesty.org.uk/webfm_send/1295.

A video of Birgitta Sif discussing the book can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHM1newwS98>.

Empathy Lab is a start-up that exists to strengthen the teaching of empathy in schools and the importance of understanding the experience of others. Supported by authors and advocates for empathy education, the website address is <http://www.empathylab.uk/>



Looking closely at the book's illustrations is a recurring activity in this scheme of work because the pictures richly enhance the written narrative. There are important details in the pictures that could be overlooked but are very important – such as the presence of Olivia at the party scene. I believe that attending to visual clues is a critical drama skill, necessary for both creating and 'reading' drama scenes.

that call for a close observation of the picture. Introduce the students to some of the themes of the book and have them relate these themes to their own experiences. Some ideas for questions:

- ▶ Does Oliver look happy/sad?
- ▶ Is he alone?
- ▶ What is he doing in the picture?
- ▶ What do you think the book might be about and why do you think so?
- ▶ What kind of games do you play with your toys?
- ▶ Do you pretend your toys are 'real'?
- ▶ Do you prefer to play with your toys or with other children?
- ▶ What do you do when there are no other children to play with?

Back to the book (15 mins)

Read the book to the class. Take time to discuss the pictures and ask the students what they think it is about and what it might teach us. Possible follow up questions to ask:

- ▶ Have they ever felt like Oliver?
- ▶ Can they describe the occasion or the kinds of circumstances that make them feel 'different' from everybody else?

If the students are reluctant to speak, the teacher could share such an experience. Also, ask for a show of hands from those who have experienced feeling 'different'. Draw attention to the number of hands up and suggest that feeling different may in fact be more common than we think it is.

Devised scenes (15 mins)

Have the students work in groups of about 4 or 5 and ask them to create a scene based on a character feeling different and alone (perhaps one just shared by a student or the teacher), or an imagined experience of 'being different'.

Ask the groups to share their scenes and discuss any common themes that emerge from them. Ask how much the behaviour of other characters in the scene affected the sense of 'being different' as felt by the 'main character'?

Forum theatre-based scenes (15 mins)

Explain that in forum theatre the idea is to improve a situation for a 'protagonist' who feels alienated in some way. Challenge the groups to re-create their scene, by maintaining the actions of the protagonist who 'feels different' but changing the behaviour of those around him or her so that they feel more included rather than alienated in the devised situation.

Have the groups perform their changed scenarios and affirm the groups for being willing to have a go at changing their creative work.

Plenary (10 mins)

Close with a discussion of how the changed attitudes of those around the protagonist affected the outcome and events in the scenes. Ask the student who was role-playing the protagonist if the changed behaviour affected their experience of 'being different'.

Lesson 2: 'I want to fly away'

This lesson focuses on a key scene from the book when, surrounded by family and friends at a party, Oliver still chooses to play on his own. The only words to accompany this image are 'Sometimes, wherever he was, he wanted to fly away' and these words form the backdrop to the drama work.

Learning objectives

By the end of the lesson students will have learnt:

- ▶ To look closely at illustrations for clues to themes
- ▶ To work as a class to create a key moment from the story
- ▶ To use thought tracking to bring the characters to life
- ▶ To apply the idea of 'what if' to the drama work
- ▶ To reflect on the key moment from an insider's perspective
- ▶ To consider how the actions of others can help those who 'feel different'.

A picture discussion (10 mins)

Focus on the picture of Oliver playing by himself under the table during a family party. Re-read the sentence that goes with this picture: 'Sometimes, wherever he was, he wanted to fly away'. Ask why they think Oliver wanted to fly away during

Resources

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that family party? Why does he look happy all by himself? Do they notice that one other person in the room has seen him and is looking at him shyly? Why is she not talking or playing with him? Does she feel different too? Are there other people in the picture who may also be feeling a bit 'different'? What about the boy sitting on the sofa by himself eating a cupcake?

Re-creating the party scene (10 mins)

Invite the class to re-create the picture. Begin by asking for a volunteer to be Oliver, under a table and playing with soft toys by himself. After that select one student at a time to fill in the space around Oliver by becoming one of the people, or pets or objects in the scene (for example, the 'mum' figure setting the plates on the table, the cat under the chair, the birthday cake on the table). In role, the students can move around the space, talk to other characters or just be 'occupied' in their own space.

Thought tracking of characters at the party (10 mins)

On a given signal, everyone is still and when a student is tapped on the shoulder, they speak aloud an in-the-moment thought of their character/pet/object. Then the general party hubbub continues until silence is called for again and someone else is tapped on the shoulder for a thought tracking.

The final person to be 'thought tracked' is Oliver. Finish the scene by having the class say together the line from the book: 'And sometimes, wherever he was, he wanted to fly away.'

Reflection on party scene (10 mins)

Invite the class to relax for a moment and give their opinions or insights on viewing the scene as a participant in it. What was their view of other characters in the scene? Were they also feeling a bit different like Oliver was, and did they also wish they could fly away or were they content to be at the party? Use their answers as an opportunity to discuss how in a group situation, people can be feeling differently about being there and sometimes we assume that others are more confident than we are but it is not necessarily so.

What if...? activity (10 mins)

Building on Lesson 1's use of forum theatre, the students should be familiar with its aim of showing an alternative outcome of a given scene. Pose the following question – *What if* the characters do or say something so that Oliver doesn't wish to fly away from the party? (E.g. What if someone went and played with him under the table?) Invite the students to make some 'what if' suggestions first and then to try them out. How do these 'what if' actions change the scene? Ask the student who is role-playing Oliver how these 'what if' actions affected their experience of 'feeling different' in the scene.

Plenary (10 mins)

Use the 'what if' activity to reinforce the idea that the characters might have helped Oliver to have felt more included and accepted at the party – not by changing him but by changing *their own* attitude. Ask if that has ever happened to anyone in the class: What did someone else do or say that helped them feel not so different? How might this apply to situations at school?

Lesson 3: Scenes from the book

Lesson 2 was based around one particular scene from the book; this lesson provides an overview of various scenes that tell Oliver's story.

Learning objectives

By the end of the lesson students will have learnt:

- ▶ To tell the story of *Oliver* based on the pictures
- ▶ Illustrations can be an important part of narration.
- ▶ Visual details are important in tableaux
- ▶ To work together to create and perform a tableau based on narrative from the book
- ▶ To work together to create and perform an imagined scene
- ▶ To comment on their creative choices.

The students narrate the story (10 mins)

Turn the pages of *Oliver* slowly and ask the students to narrate the story based on the details they see. Spend a few minutes on each picture so that important

Resources

- ▶ *Oliver* by Birgitta Sif, published by Walker Books Ltd
- ▶ Sentence strips from the book (see below).

details are noticed. Affirm every observation and use this to reinforce how we all notice different things.

Tableau creations (20 mins)

Organise the students into groups of about 5 and give each group one of the following sentence strips from the book:

- ▶ *Oliver felt a bit different*
- ▶ *He lived in his own world happily with his friends*
- ▶ *Oliver and his friends had lots of adventures together*
- ▶ *Sometimes there were things that Oliver had to do on his own*
- ▶ *Sometimes, wherever he was, he wanted to fly away*
- ▶ *One evening, he played the piano for his friends but no one listened*
- ▶ *Oliver was a bit different but it didn't matter. Olivia was a bit different too.*

Ask each group to create a tableau of their sentence. Refer back to the earlier discussion on the importance of detail as visual clues, i.e. body language, facial expressions, the spacing between people. Also, explain that one person in the group will say aloud the sentence as they share their tableau. Encourage the students to create *their own* image to match the sentence rather than basing it on the illustration in the book.

As groups create their still image, visit each group and offer encouragement/help/advice if needed.

Call all the groups together in a circle and explain they will be sharing their tableaux as 'theatre in the round'.

Have the groups show their tableaux in the order of the sentences in the book. As each group shows, draw attention to how students are using their bodies to show emotion, or important themes such as isolation and connection (e.g. at the end of the story between Oliver and Olivia).

Discussion of creative process (5 mins)

Referring back to the earlier discussion on noticing the details in illustrations, invite students to comment on the details they felt important to include in their tableaux. For example, why did they make certain choices about body positioning, gestures, and facial expressions? Invite the rest of the class to comment on the effectiveness of the visual details – how did they interpret or 'read' a tableau? Were there some visual clues within the tableaux that made them easier to understand?

Scene creation with sharing (20 mins)

Ask for opinions on the final picture in the book where the final words 'The End' have been crossed out and replaced with the words 'The Beginning'? Then, with the idea of a new beginning as a theme, ask the groups to devise a scene (lasting about 5 mins) that shows one of the adventures they can imagine Oliver and Olivia are going to have in their new friendship.

Ask the groups to share their scenes and comment on the importance of friendship for sharing experiences in life. Praise each group for their imagined scenes and make connections to Oliver's imaginative mind when he plays with his toys.

Final thoughts (5 mins)

Leave them with the thought that if we all feel a bit different at times, then we can't really be that different from each other. Also, friendships are possible if we are prepared to take a risk in making connections with others – just like Oliver did with Olivia.

Lesson 4: Students choose how to show learning

This lesson aims to maintain the spirit of the book *Oliver* by allowing students to pursue their own interests in making a creative response to the book, but also encouraging them to make connections with other classmates by sharing their work in progress and seeking feedback. Students will be expected to perform or share their work but this may have to occur in a follow up session if they need the whole lesson to create and work on their response. It would also be worth considering sharing the creative work in a more formal sort of presentation, such as a class assembly, an activity during book week or an in-class performance that parents could be invited to attend. (Or you could even invite Birgitta Sif!)

Learning objectives

By the end of the lesson students will have learnt:

- ▶ To work together to create and perform a creative response to the book *Oliver*.
- Or:
- ▶ To work individually to create and perform a creative response to the book *Oliver*
- ▶ To seek feedback on their work in progress
- ▶ To comment on their creative choices.

Introduction (15 mins)

Explain to the students that for this final lesson on *Oliver*, they will be able to choose a creative and drama-based format for responding to the themes of the story. The choices will be based on work completed individually or in groups. However, if they choose to do an individual response, advise that they will be expected to share their work with a partner to gain feedback and encouragement. Suggestions for choices are given below, but it would also be useful to have these posted on a whiteboard for students to refer to.

Talk through the choices, as students may have questions about them or may seek guidance regarding the logistics of the choices. A quick recap/description of what is a monologue and some sample monologues as resources may also be useful as that is one of the choices for individual work.

Individual choices

- ▶ Write a monologue based on an experience (real or imagined) of when you felt different
- ▶ Write a monologue from the point of view of one of Oliver's toys
- ▶ Write a monologue from the point of view of Olivia after she had seen Oliver under the table at the party but had been too shy to approach him
- ▶ Write a letter to Oliver empathising with his feelings of feeling different or being alone
- ▶ Write a scene script based on an adventure that Oliver and Olivia have after they meet
- ▶ Prepare a puppet show based on the front cover of the book – you could pretend to be Oliver talking to the puppets or you could pretend to be yourself having a conversation with the puppets.

Group choices

- ▶ Act out the entire story of *Oliver* with students taking on the roles of Oliver's toys, family members and Olivia.
- ▶ Prepare and rehearse a scene about an adventure Oliver and Olivia have after they meet.
- ▶ Prepare and rehearse a series of 'what if' moments based on the story, e.g. What if one of the toys comes to life and starts to give Oliver advice on how he could make friends.
- ▶ Prepare and rehearse a scene about the toys coming together when Oliver is in bed and expressing their concerns about his lack of friends.
- ▶ In a group of 3, prepare a scene that is based on the front cover of the book. Two of the students could pretend to be the puppets and one student could be in role as Oliver. What would they talk about?

Creative responses (35 mins)

Once the students have reviewed and selected what they are doing from the list of suggested creative responses, they will need most of the rest of the lesson to work on preparing them for a more formal time of sharing (see the introduction to this lesson for more ideas on this). And of course they may have other (and better!) ideas for their own creative responses.

If possible it would be a good idea to have a space set aside for students who want to work individually but encourage intermittent 'checking in' with a partner on their progress (and of course they can come to you but emphasise the importance of friendship feedback and make the connection with the *Oliver* story).

Plenary (10 mins)

Gather the students together and have them explain to the rest of the class what they have been working on as their creative responses. Allow time for students to share their work – if not all of it, then a 'snapshot'. For example, a group could share a key moment from a devised scene (just like the party in the book was a key scene) or students could share some of their monologue/individual writing. Have students offer positive feedback that affirms the diversity of responses.

Resources

- ▶ *Oliver* by Birgitta Sif, published by Walker Books Ltd
- ▶ List of suggested activities written on whiteboard
- ▶ Pens/pencils and paper for monologues/scene writing
- ▶ Examples of monologues
- ▶ Puppets.

Extension activities

Further writing/research activities could be completed in another lesson to supplement this scheme of work and some ideas for extension activities are:

- ▶ Writing to Birgitta Sif and telling her your opinion of the book, the activities you did or asking her questions about the book and her writing/illustrating process
- ▶ Writing and illustrating your own story where the pictures give extra information about events and characters
- ▶ Watching the video of Birgitta Sif talking about the book (see link on p.1) and creating a miniature book as she did
- ▶ Researching other works of fiction endorsed by Amnesty International that teach about human rights (www.amnesty.org.uk/fiction-and-human-rights)